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Libya's Qaddafi Is Heading for a Fall

Muammar Qaddafi, the desert fox who has ruled Libya with increasing instability since 1969, is likely to be toppled by a military coup within a year.

During his 16 years in power, Qaddafi has outdone the proverbial nine-lived cat. By our count he has survived at least 22 attempts to assassinate or otherwise unseat him. He has been nicked by a bullet but has never been seriously wounded.

Yet the time has never been riper for either a spontaneous coup from the inside or one orchestrated from the outside, according to our sources, who include Libyans still in the country as well as in exile. The Central Intelligence Agency, in a recent top-secret evaluation, rates Qaddafi as "very vulnerable."

The most serious coup attempt, last August, got little publicity in the western media, but its significance was not lost on Qaddafi-watchers in the intelligence community. In one of his all-too-frequent fits of pique, Qaddafi ordered his generals to invade Tunisia. Instead, they mutinied.

It was only by the skin of his teeth that Qaddafi survived this attempt. His loyal guards, including East Germans, were able to halt the planes and tanks that the mutinous officers had ordered to attack Tripoli. At least 13 senior air force officers and 30 army officers were subsequently arrested.

Without the loyalty of the military colleagues who put him in power, Qaddafi is on a slippery slope. Just how slippery was demonstrated by the Sept. 1 anniversary celebration of his 1969 coup. For the first time ever, the great parade contained no military units, only a rabble of revolutionary militants.

In his speech, the distrustful dictator put the best face possible on this curious absence of military muscle. "The Revolutionary Committee Movement," he said, "which we parade today instead of tanks and aircraft, which are standing in their bases and camps, is another display of power."

Qaddafi knows he can survive as long as he has the military behind him. But a secret CIA report states: "That support is no longer assured."

The CIA report notes that trouble "has been brewing within the officer corps," and adds: "Qaddafi's policies have caused bitterness and friction, especially among the Free Officers, a loose organization of about 60 officers who brought Qaddafi to power and hold key posts in the armed forces and security apparatus."

Consequently, Qaddafi has "reduced his reliance on the officer corps . . . gambling that the rank-and-file of the armed forces (along with the East German bodyguard) can protect him from challenges." In hopes of cementing the lower echelons' loyalty, "he has suggested to his fellow Bedouin tribesmen, who make up the rank and file, that they should be suspicious of their largely city-bred officers."

Libyan experts predict that his days are numbered.

"The time is ripe," one intelligence source said. "His domestic base is eroding fast. There will be greater upsurges and attacks against him." And sooner or later, one will succeed.

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